

#255 GEORGE LAITNER

USS TANEY, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON

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CARA KIMURA

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(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 5, 1996, at 6:45 p.m. The person being interviewed is George Laitner who was on the [*USCGC*] *TANEY*, U.S. Coast Guard, on December 7, 1941.

George, for the record, would you please state your full name?

George Laitner (GL): Dr. George Laitner, no middle initial.

MS: And when were you born?

GL: Eleven, twenty-two, twenty-two.

MS: And where was that?

GL: Omaha, Nebraska.

MS: Very good. Now, why military service?

GL: Because ever since I was in about the fourth or fifth grade, I had the idea about going to sea and see the world. And about two weeks after graduation from high school, I enlisted in the Coast Guard and went to Port Townsend, Washington for the basic training and decided that aloha land would just be wonderful, with hula girls and all that kind of thing and came here, aboard the *TANEY*.

MS: Oh, you actually came to Hawaii on your . . .

GL: No, to be on the *TANEY*.

MS: Oh, to be on it.

GL: Right.

MS: How did you get from the Mainland to here?

GL: It was about the slowest ship that the U.S. Navy could possibly have. I think it probably took us thirteen to fourteen days to come from San Francisco. Probably six or eight knots, something like that.

MS: Oh my god.

GL: We had a jolly time, being the part of the Coast Guard and the Navy was not necessarily very enthusiastic about that. One day we would paint a bulkhead, a wall, and then the next day we'd scrape it all off again. And then the next day we would repaint it and then the next day we would scrape it off. And the next day we would repaint it for thirteen or fourteen days.

MS: But you didn't get into any trouble.

(Laughter)

GL: None whatsoever. None whatsoever.

MS: My goodness. What was going to be your job when you got to where your assignment was? Or did you know?

GL: No. At that time, I was an apprentice seaman and we made -- let's see, thirty dollars a month -- twenty-one dollars a month. One, we were paid twice a month. One payment would be ten dollars, and then two weeks later, we got eleven dollars, and we felt so good about that.

(Laughter)

GL: I enlisted on December 6 of 1940. And that's an interesting date because it is a kind of explanation of some of the things that I'm going to say in a moment or two.

MS: Oh, okay. Very good. We'll get to that in just a second.

GL: Okay.

MS: Did you get a chance to have any liberty here?

GL: Oh yes, yes, yes. Oh. The second part of what I'm going to say is that at that time, there were not world tensions. You didn't expect to get into any problems. You didn't think about really having a war. For instance, when the Japanese attacked, we said it'd probably take two weeks and maybe we'd blow them out of the water and then we'd all go home. And some said they wouldn't shave until we won the war and others said they wouldn't let their hair grow until we won the war, and that kind. It's a different, a whole different kind of thing, a whole different idea, concept, feeling, all of those things.

MS: But you guys were talking ahead of time that the tensions were with Japan?

GL: But we really didn't expect anything to happen.

MS: Especially here in Hawaii.

GL: Especially here in Hawaii. You know.

MS: Maybe the Philippines, or . . .

GL: Somewhere else. Not here.

MS: Aloha land.

GL: Yeah.

(Laughter)

GL: And when I came here as an about eighteen-year old, between seventeen and eighteen, it was a jolly -- it really was a jolly time. Because if a sailor and a dog were both hit by an automobile and they were in a gutter, the people here would have called a veterinarian and just forgotten about the sailor altogether.

MS: I bet.

GL: We were -- at the time that I was here when the war was going on, there were 365 adult males to every single female of any age, from zero to 100. Three hundred sixty-five adult males.

MS: Oh my gosh. There's no place on earth with . . .

(Laughter)

GL: It was documented by the *Readers' Digest*.

MS: Oh boy. Well, so when you got your liberty and you had a couple of bucks in your pocket, what'd you do?

GL: In 1941 -- well, 1940. Let's see, it was about January, February, March, somewhere April, at that time, there was a bar and then a jewelry store, and a bar, and a clothing store, and a bar, and so on. And out of every one was "San Antonio Rose." Every bar had this blasting out of the door. And every time I hear that

song, whenever I get a flashback. I can see Waikiki, I can see -- I can be here, because that was the way it was.

MS: Wow. Did you ever hear of the Black Cat? Black Cat cafe?

GL: Probably. (Chuckles)

MS: A lot of the guys mentioned they hit the Y first and they go to the Black Cat cafe.

GL: That was right across -- if I remember, that was right across the street.

MS: That's it! (Laughs)

GL: Right across the street. That's part of what I want to tell.

MS: Oh, okay. Well, is that something you want to jump into right now, or . . .

GL: Well, no. If I get started, I really get going.

(Laughter)

MS: Well, we'll get you there real quick.

GL: Okay.

MS: Now, on December the sixth, where was your sleeping quarters? Where was your home?

GL: Oh, okay. This starts the whole thing. This brings back the flood of memory.

On December 6 of 1941, we -- there were about thirteen of us that were still together that enlisted in Omaha and come to Port Townsend and came here. And now, we're talking seventeen, eighteen-year old kids. We decided we're going to the bar and we're really going to celebrate and it was at the Black Cat. And the Black Cat had a huge menu above the bar. A is for ale, B is for something, C is for something entirely, G is for gin, W is for whiskey. So we said we're really going to make a night of this. So we started with the A's and we'll all have a round of A's, whatever A was. And then we had a B, and then a C, and then a D. I don't know how far we got. Now, we're talking seventeen,

eighteen-year old kids. They didn't care. If you had the money to buy it, that's the way it was.

Now, that took care of December 6. December 7 of 1941, at 7:55 a.m., I was in sick bay. And I was talking to a friend of mine who was a pharmacist mate and I -- "What do you have that's going to take care of this?"

And then the bombs started coming. I really did not know whether this was something that I was imagining and the thumping, somebody pounding, and all the rest of these things are going on in my mind.

So at that time, we had no P.A. system, nothing that you could hear. And we're talking about Sunday morning, when everything is nice and easy and all the rest of these things and we don't expect any particular problems. The signal is, "Clang, clang, clang, clang, clang."

Now, this is, "Away the landing party." This is, "Fire aboard ship." This is general quarters. This is everything and nobody knows what it is -- "Bang, bang, bang."

And we got 300 guys running around and say, "What are we doing?"

"Well, this is fire and rescue."

"Okay. Well, I'll go to that station."

I get to there, I say, "Where are you going?"

"Well, this is general quarters."

"Well, I'll go there."

And somebody else said, "Well, this was something else," and we're all running around wondering what the devil to do, each one of us. We're so confused and we had no more idea of what was going on than anything.

MS: Oh my god.

GL: So . . .

MS: How'd you get that sorted out?

GL: (Chuckles) When the bombs started really coming, getting a little close, then we knew that, most of us -- now, this is --- the horrors have been documented. The heroism has been documented. All of the atrocities, all of the things that have happened, that's well documented. I would say that after all this is over and we have adjusted to -- we come to some of the humorous things, the light things that happened. Now, let me go over some of them.

Eighteen-year old kid, one of the most naive kids in the world is on a fifty-caliber machine gun. Now, there are two parts to a fifty-caliber machine gun. One shoots at about 3,000 rounds a minute and the other shoots at one shot, "Boom, boom, boom."

He went through the entire attack on Pearl Harbor with it down on one shot at a time. One shot at a time.

MS: Did he get any hits?

GL: The guys on the aft three-inch anti-aircraft, one of them said that he realized that at that time the American airplanes had a red dot in the middle of the star, a red dot. So he saw the red dot, well these are our guys. So he's firing to see how close he can come without actually hitting the flight.

MS: (Chuckles) Through the entire attack, he's . . .

GL: In the entire attack he's trying to see how close he can come to the plane. We -- I'm on the third out, the third deck up on the number three anti-aircraft gun. And down below, where the live ammunition -- all we ever worked with was a dummy, wooden ammunition, loading and going through all this was all faux pas. Down below, about five, six stories, way down in the magazine is where the magazine is, and it's locked. And it is a summary court martial to open that, a summary court martial to open that unless you have an officer. And we were up on top saying, "My god, they're here. They're flying around. They're coming! Send up live ammunition!"

The guys down there said, "You're all drunk up there. We're not going to open this thing! I'm not going to get any summary court martial!"

Some of the officers are ashore. There's nobody going to open this thing up. And by the time we're screaming back and forth

and back and forth, then the live ammunition starts coming up and we start firing.

So those are some of the lighter things, and I have to emphasize after it's all over, after we all kind of calmed down and we all exchanged our stories and that kind of thing.

MS: You recognized there was a little humor among the horror?

GL: Yes. Yes, yes, yes. The tragedy -- I'm not making light of this by any possible stretch of the imagination, but they were the lighter things.

MS: It just certainly shows how human emotions can do a full swing in times of great stress.

GL: Mm-hm.

MS: Now, I was just curious with your particular vessel, where was your sleeping quarters?

GL: We were about two piers down from Aloha Tower.

MS: Okay.

GL: And when this first started, there was a small inter-island ship there. And the crew members were all -- they, "Oh boy, you know, here's dummy runs. They're dropping bombs. This is so exciting!"

And they got all their breakfast and they were sitting (chuckles) on the edge of the ship and wondering what's going to happen. And finally, they decided, you know, this is for real! And they just evaporated. They went.

MS: Geez.

GL: That was one of the things that happened.

MS: Yeah. You said you were seeing a pharmacists' mate when things started to actually happen. Was that right there or were you elsewhere at the time?

GL: No, no, no. This was aboard ship.

MS: Okay, this was yours.

GL: Yeah. Yeah.

MS: So took everybody a little bit of time to kind of get the idea that this is the real thing. Now, once you kind of got over that, you recognized it was the Japanese and did you have a feeling that not only was this going to be an air attack but there was going to be a possible invasion coming up, or did you have any time to think about any of that?

GL: Not really. Right after that, we went on duty out in front of Pearl and we did the figure eight's for hours after hours, after hours. And of course, there were all kinds of wild rumors but nobody knew anything. But one of the main things I have to say is that we were not prepared psychologically for this kind of thing. It just didn't -- this was beyond belief. Come on, we're talking about invasion from Mars, or something like that. That's not going to happen.

MS: Right. So you guys were just literally caught with your mouths hanging open in a lot of ways, by surprise.

GL: Right on.

MS: Wow. Now, because you were removed a few steps away from the major part of the action and it was sort of that surrealistic, "Oh, it's over there," view of things, did you feel like things were going to come down on top of you pretty quick? Did you have any planes that were starting to come closer? Any explosions around you . . .

GL: Oh yeah, explosions around. Yes, that's true. But no, we, I think, our 327-foot ship, we're not going to create a lot of havoc among. We're not going to chase the Japanese. We're not a major thing. We're just a size of a tin-can, a destroyer. We knew the big ones were the ones that they were after.

MS: Okay. So then, once you guys got things together and you got into the action mode and started out toward the mouth of Pearl, did you have your full complement aboard?

GL: No. No. They came, frittered in. Mostly yes, but not really, not all. One of the ensigns was sequestered with his bride. They were married on December the sixth. (Chuckles)

MS: I knew you didn't expect to see him.

(Laughter)

GL: Boy, it would have to take a war to break, if he never seen his wife.

MS: Oh my, well, that'll be another story then.

(Laughter)

GL: Whole different genre.

MS: The reason I'm asking you that is because a little bit earlier you said you didn't have some of the officers aboard. Did you have your captain and some of his major players there?

GL: Now, honestly, I really don't remember. I hadn't thought about it. They came aboard, of course, after things started going, but I don't know. It would just be a guess. I really don't know. I was a first class seaman. (Chuckles)

MS: So it really told you, you had to know.

(Laughter)

GL: I was smart enough to have a Ph.D. and be a Phi Beta Kappa, but I wasn't smart enough to be an officer.

MS: (Laughs) Well, now when you guys went from the Aloha Tower area and headed over to Pearl, what kind of orders -- and maybe hindsight -- what kind of orders were you under? What were you supposed to do?

GL: Looking for one-man or two-man submarines.

MS: Okay, so that would -- those had already been sighted.

GL: Yeah.

MS: You folks were reacting to the possibility of more coming in?

GL: Mm-hm. Right. Right. Get in any way they could. If not by plane, then under the net, or through the net, or somewhere like that. And that was when I was on submarine detection, at the time.

- : What -- had you knew anything about the smaller submarines before the attack, or was this something that came up during the attack?
- GL: This, I think, came up during the attack. I don't really recall. Now, we're talking fifty-five years ago. I don't really recall.
- : Now, was there a lot of anti-submarine patrolling prior to the attack?
- GL: Not really. Not really. No, we were there and we dumped, as I recall, we dumped depth charges on everything.
- : What was the reliability of the depth charges? Were they pretty good or half-and-half, or was it hard to tell?
- GL: Oh, unfortunately, it wasn't the depth charges, it was the sound operator, the sonar operator. If he does his work precisely, the depth charges will take care of the situation. Later on, I decided that I had killed more whales in the South Pacific ocean than any other living human being, because when you send out -- a male and female usually run together, or a pod. And you send out an echo and there's no way that when that echo comes back that you can tell whether this is a submarine or whether this is a whale. So you don't take any chances, you know, wait for something to come up and spout. You take action. You drop a few depth charges and then tons of blubber start coming up, and red the water for acres.
- : And did you get a chance to see the captured two-man submarine?
- GL: The what?
- : The Navy captured one of the Japanese midget submarines. Did you get a chance to see it while it was at Pearl Harbor?
- GL: I did later on, but I can't remember. We were gone a long time after that. We would go to sea for four or five, six, seven weeks at a time. And you'd get back on the dock and you could barely walk because the dock didn't move. The damn thing was just, you know, level and solid.
- MS: When you approached the entrance to Pearl, was there anybody else out there, other vessels yet? Either patrolling or coming out?

GL: I think there was some tin cans, some destroyers that came out and I couldn't tell you how many, some -- there's a whole -- you have an inner patrol and then an outer patrol, and an outer, outer, outer patrol, so I don't really know. And where I was operating, the sound equipment, the submarine detection equipment, it was pretty hard to tell who, where, when, why

MS: You didn't have any visual outside, then, where you were, your station?

GL: Mm-mm.

MS: Now, was that your particular battle station?

GL: Mine?

MS: Yes.

GL: No. No, no, no. My battle station was a first loader on a three-inch anti-aircraft.

MS: Okay.

GL: And that was very interesting. You get a shell -- if you can imagine a thirty-caliber shell that's fifty-five pounds. Well, like fifty-five pounds about like this. And you're supposed to get -- they're passing from man to man -- you're supposed to get it like this and lay that head right inside and bring it through, you know, gracefully. Well, I picked that son of a gun up and threw it in the hole. Why we ever -- how we managed to live through all that, I don't -- I could've killed 'em all. (Chuckles)

MS: (Chuckles) Oh boy. So you basically went from one station to another . . .

GL: Yes.

MS: . . . when you switched roles . . .

GL: Yes.

MS: . . . from the anti-aircraft.

GL: Yeah.

MS: Now, let me just kind of clarify in my mind here, when were you doing anti-aircraft and when did you switch loads? Were you at the dock at Aloha Tower doing anti-aircraft?

GL: Well, during actual general quarters, my station was first loader on the anti-aircraft. Now, these are antiques. They're from World War I. They were worn out by the time we got them. That was -- now, not during battle stations, but during my regular core of time. I was a first class seaman, that's all. The one who was on the sonar at the time was a rated petty officer. See, he had more experience than I.

MS: Okay. So you were filling in behind -- you were OJT with him.

GL: (Laughs) More or less.

MS: Okay. Did you have any contacts, sonar contacts out at . . .

GL: No. No. Not that I recall anything that was really amounted to anything. There could have been and that's all I can say. That's a surmise. That's a guess. Did we drop any depth charges? Probably a couple, three, but nothing came up, nothing that we could see or anything like that.

MS: It was a pretty busy spot inside the harbor and I'm sure you and the folks that were out there looking and searching had your business about you, but could you get any information about what was exactly going on elsewhere, either at the harbor or any place else? Did you have any idea of what was going on?

GL: No.

MS: You just knew there had been an attack and . . .

GL: And you could see the flames, the fires were still burning, and that kind of thing. And one of our men was there for some official reason or another, and came back and told us of the sinking of the battleships and of course, we thought he was out of his gourd, out of his mind. It couldn't be. And arguments of I know, they couldn't do that. And as I said, we never expected it, never thought it would happen, and the pushover Japanese. You know, the paper tiger kind of thing. We'll get 'em.

MS: After fifty-five years, what's your reaction to the Japanese now?

GL: Well, I'll tell you. Five years ago, when I was here in 1991, I got some postcards and one is a picture of the *ARIZONA*. And I think this is really something. The *ARIZONA* is down there and the bubbles are coming up and I turned it over and I says, "Printed in Japan."

And I really flipped. I made a damn fool of myself to whoever it was that was selling these things, saying -- you know, table pounding and all this kind of thing -- "What do you mean? They not only kill our men, but now they're making a profit from it?"

That's the best answer I can give.

MS: Thank you. Hold your thought.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

MS: So, again now, with fifty-five years, some of the things stand out pretty vividly to you and some things maybe are a little bit on the hazy side, as far as details. Is there anything that you remember that you'd like to try to relate now, that we may have missed about that day or that time period?

GL: I'd have to think.

MS: Well, that's okay. I just wondered if there was something else that you wanted to head on yourself.

GL: Well, prior to the attack, we, of course, were tied up near the Aloha Tower and we -- we're talking seventeen, eighteen-year old kids -- and we'd -- hamburgers were a nickel and cokes were a nickel, and we'd send ashore and we'd get a bunch of hamburgers and hot dogs and we'd sit on one of the hatches up on the bow of the ship as we're tied up. And about fourteen, fifteen of us all laying around, this is what we did.

One of 'em said, "You know guys, someday we're going to look back on this and say this is the happiest days of our lives."

We damn near killed him.

(Laughter)

GL: What do you mean? It's not going to get any better than this?

MS: Was he right?

GL: (Chuckles) There's some truth to that.

MS: Okay.

GL: There's some truth to that.

MS: Okay.

GL: Yeah.

MS: You guys were sure tied up in a pretty good location, too, 'cause you weren't very far from Chinatown, Nuuanu and . . .

GL: Oh no. Within walking distance.

MS: Yeah, you could get into the action there pretty quickly, couldn't you?

GL: Right, right. In '85, '86 -- no, '81 -- '96, '91, '86. In '86, when I came, that was the first time since almost the Battle of Pearl Harbor that I'd been on shore in Hawaii. And I went looking for the places that I remembered, the Y and all this, and I'm looking down and seeing nothing but parking garages and other things that just didn't mean -- there were two hotels in Waikiki in 1941. There was a pink palace and there was the Moana. And that's it. That's all. That's all she wrote. When I came back and saw all that, I thought, "I'm not in the right place."

MS: Wrong island.

GL: Yeah. Good grief.

MS: Do you remember Wo Fat's?

GL: What?

MS: Wo Fat, the Chinese restaurant . . .

GL: Oh.

MS: On Hotel Street.

GL: I don't remember too much about that.

MS: Some of the . . .

GL: There's some ribald things that I could bring up, but I don't want to do that in front of the camera.

MS: No, we'll do that later.

(Laughter)

MS: Well, some of the names sometimes reoccur, like Black Cat and Y, they keep reoccurring. Well . . .

GL: I think there were things that we were supposed to avoid and that was probably one of 'em.

MS: Rough place.

GL: I'm trying to think of other events aboard ship, strictly at that time, when we were all so terribly confused and running around, trying to do what's right, trying to do whatever it is we were supposed to do. And I can't really think of anything else. Nothing else sticks out in my mind, except the things that I have told you.

MS: Well, sometimes that happens, that we don't cover (inaudible).

GL: And too, also, I'm seventy-five years old and after fifty-five years some of the things do kind of evaporate out there. So that's it. That's about as much as I can recall.

MS: Well, let's suppose it's a hundred years from now. It's the 150th, or 155th, what would you like to have the people, the kids that are not born yet, what would you like to have them know or remember? What's the lesson of Pearl Harbor you'd like to see them remember?

GL: That men so loved their country that they gave their lives for it. They had the duty. They had a sense of honor that somehow is not quite like it used to be. Love of country. This is my own, my native land, that kind of thing. If you remember, during the Korean War and Army action, whatever, that there were people who were in the military didn't even wear their uniforms, sure, because it was a kind of disgrace. But there was a nobility of serving your country that I think that I'd like to have them,

people at that time, remember. My family certainly remembers that and says it on any number of occasions, that their father was a Pearl Harbor survivor and I certainly have. I'm proud of it. People remember where they were on December 7, 1941 and when John Kennedy was assassinated. Everybody knows.

MS: Sure. Well, we're very proud of you and everything that your entire generation did and would like to -- from my generation to yours -- say thank you. If it wasn't for what you guys did, we wouldn't be sitting here and we thank you for that very, very much. Thank you for your time this evening. We really appreciate it.

GL: I'd say my pleasure.

MS: Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you very much.

GL: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW